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December 10, 1993

MEMORANDUM

TO: COMSTOCK WORK GROUP

FROM: RON JAMES, State Historic Preservation Officer

SUBJECT: EVEN MORE PROGRESS

Many things have happened since I wrote the last memo for our group. Obviously, I should have written earlier. But I didn't. The 1993 Archaeological Field School went very well. We had nearly 1,500 visitors in five weeks. My office has found funding for next year's Field School, and so we are on our way. Enclosed is a manuscript for a special issue of the National Trust Forum which will be dedicated exclusively to archaeology. The guest editor wanted something on the Comstock project, and it seemed a good time to publicize next year's program. Please read the text and make certain that I did not misrepresent any of your agencies or our group. It's not too late to make changes.

Alice's MOU committee is waiting for further action from the BLM. The PR committee will gear-up for next year's PR blitz in association with the 1994 Field School. If any of the other committees have something to report let me know and I will pass it along. If you don't have anything to report, then perhaps you need to get moving on whatever you're supposed to be doing.

As always, I want to hear your ideas and suggestions for the future, and if you have anything you would like communicated to the rest of the group, let me know. We should have a meeting soon, but then lots of things should happen. Let me know if you have strong feelings one way or the other.

/rj

enclosure

Unlocking the Second Big Bonanza: Retrieving the Archaeological Record of Virginia City

Ronald M. James
State Historic Preservation Officer
11/30/93

In the summer of 1993, the University of Nevada, Reno hosted the first Comstock Archaeological Field School. It was an outstanding success, and it initiated active management of an important resource in one of the nation's largest historic landmarks.

Immigrants from throughout the world founded Nevada's Comstock Mining District after the gold and silver strikes of 1859. For the next twenty years, local mines yielded millions of dollars in ore and established technological innovations and social patterns that echoed throughout the mining West. Virginia City, often called the Queen of the Comstock, became internationally famous and a cornerstone of the western United States. Hundreds of remaining buildings give vivid testimony to the District's nineteenth-century preeminence. In fact as early as the 1930s, the National Park Service recognized the historic importance of the area by listing it on an early register.

Nevertheless, much more than buildings constitute the cultural resources of the Landmark District. Locked within the archaeological record of the Comstock is untold opportunity for insight into the social history of one of the nation's most important mining communities. Virginia City's great Bonanza period yielded tons of gold and silver and an abundance of

primary sources, but issues involving gender, minorities and the working class are poorly documented in the written record. In the latter topics, archaeology can offer insight. Unfortunately, treatment of that resource has suffered from general neglect and a lack of active management.

The Comstock Historic District has an architectural review commission that governs alterations to historic buildings, but it has no authority over artifacts on the ground and structural ruins. For decades tourists took what they could find, mining companies moved acres of soil, and residents developed private land, always with an eye on collecting "memorabilia."

The population of Virginia City and its sister Comstock communities numbered over 25,000 at its peak in 1875 but dwindled to fewer than one thousand by the twentieth century. Years of attrition reduced the building stock, leaving most of the evidence of the Comstock's "Big Bonanza" in the form of archaeology. With all these factors in mind, some local residents began advocating the protection of archaeological sites. The National Park Service published an archaeological overview by Dr. Donald L. Hardesty for the District in 1980, but without funding, further action would wait. Appeals on behalf of this resource went all the way to the Secretary of the Interior. Repeatedly, elected officials and committees studied the issue, examining alternatives, but ultimately mining, development, and vandalism continued with only occasional consideration extended to the archaeological record.

Finally, several agencies and organizations decided to take the proverbial bull by the horns so that at least some of the landmark's archaeology would become part of the permanent record of the area's history. The Nevada State Historic Preservation Office built on Hardesty's work by developing a research design that identifies gender, ethnicity, and occupation as issues local archaeology might enlightened. With the plan in hand, the Office called a meeting involving twenty-one local, state and federal agencies. Although points of view were diverse, archaeology provided a surprising common ground. For one reason or another, everyone saw the conservation and study of the resource as beneficial.

For the Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service, the project represented an opportunity to assist local and state governments, to fulfill mandates to manage cultural resources positively, and to see it done decisively. The Environmental Protection Agency which had been conducting research on potential "super fund" sites associated with mining saw this as a chance to share information while educating other agencies about their program. The Anthropology Department of the University of Nevada, Reno recognized the program as a means to conduct research on an important topic, to promote public awareness for archaeological resources, and to fund a field school in the discipline. For the two counties which share the Comstock Historic District, an archaeological excavation would provide an additional tourist attraction for the area. It would

also help resolve conflicts between mining and cultural resource advocates.

The idea of active management of the Comstock archaeology had unanimous support. The meetings of this group demonstrated that archaeological resources can have value to diverse groups and agencies. Consequently, Dr. Hardesty began the first steps needed to establish a Comstock Field School. With the help of National Park Service funding administered by the State Historic Preservation Office, the Comstock was set for its first systematic excavation of an archaeological site.

Lines of cooperation still needed to be forged, however. To be a complete success, local business owners would have to perceive the archaeological field school as beneficial to the local economy. An intense public relations campaign would serve to attract visitors to the site and to educate District residents so that they did not see the program as an inspiration to explore the archaeological record themselves. Organizers of the excavation met with the Chamber of Commerce to discuss strategies for promotion. Everyone decided that daily walking tours of the dig would be helpful. In addition, all agreed that the Fourth Ward School, recently opened as a local museum, should serve as a field lab so visitors could view the process of cleaning and cataloguing of artifacts.

The University-run Field School initiated excavation in June of 1993 on land owned by the Comstock Historic District Commission. The strategy was to incorporate residents as much as

possible. Since the site was highly visible on Virginia City's main street, there was considerable concern for vandalism. The Storey County Sheriff provided protection during off hours with regular surveillance of the property. Surprisingly, officers needed to ask only a few people to leave, and there was evidence of only one minor instance of the excavation being disturbed in search of artifacts.

The lack of vandalism may have been due to residents viewing the project as their own, not as belonging to an outside agency or body. Locating the field lab in the Fourth Ward School, a popular building in Virginia City, curried considerable good will in the community. The School provided a highly visible location to display artifacts being catalogued, allowing everyone an opportunity to see the material being removed. In addition, having the field lab in the School increased visitation to the school museum.

The campaign to increase local good will toward archaeology also included coverage in the local Comstock Chronicle as frequently as the generous editor could justify it. The articles discussed the fact that the artifacts retrieved would become public property, owned by everyone, and that an exhibit in Virginia City's Fourth Ward School was one of the objectives. The Chronicle also stressed how the excavation would generate information and insight into the community's past, enriching the entire district whether from the perspective of history buffs or from the point of view of those who market the Landmark's history

to tourists.

Local amateur enthusiasts assisted Hardesty and his students in identifying potential locations of privy and garbage pits. Students benefited from the experience of these amateurs who in turn came to understand how the goals of the field school stressed the documentation of the past more than the retrieval of collectibles. Local volunteers augmented the labor force, again to the benefit of everyone.

The Storey County Public Works department provided a backhoe to cut trenches through the site. Although initially destructive, the method proved a time-saving device by exposing a profile of what Hardesty and his assistant came to realize was a complicated series of deposits. The Comstock Historic District Commission property had been home to three multi-level buildings during Virginia City's heyday in the nineteenth century. These were demolished by the turn of the century, leaving an empty lot. Locals used the hill-side of the property as a dumping ground for decades, casting debris down the slope. This helped "seal" the nineteenth-century remains of the original occupants but did so with a jumbled cap of artifacts anywhere from several decades to a few months old. These were mixed with soil containing their own nineteenth-century remains moved from other construction projects in the area. Precise unfolding of the layers was necessary to decipher the complex history of the site.

The heat of summer and the 7,000 foot elevation combined to make work difficult, but the thousands of artifacts retrieved

helped maintain the interest of students, volunteers and their supervisors. When the teams reached the actual nineteenth-century occupation layers, they found a wealth of material. Besides countless bits of broken glass and rusted metal, the archaeologists uncovered many artifacts that corresponded directly to the documented history of the lots. Within the brick foundation of Shanahan and O'Connor's Saloon and Hibernia Brewery, for example, were the predictable multitude of broken whiskey and wine bottles. Added to this were gambling chips and dice. While not unexpected, these artifacts did a great deal to convey the atmosphere of the place and to conjure up an image of what it may have been like in the establishment. A metal trademark from a Singer sewing machine retrieved from the remains of the middle building fit nicely into the records that indicated it had been home to a seamstress and Singer distributor.

Still other evidence provided additional, less predictable insight into the lives of the people who worked and dwelled there. Analysis is still being conducted, but on-site speculation abounded. Several marbles and the remains of rusted metal toys including a wagon and a locomotive appear to correspond nicely to the fact that during much of the nineteenth century, one third of Virginia City's population was school-aged. At least part of the rough-and-tumble image of the frontier mining town has never fit with this observation, and these artifacts provide vivid reminders that this was also a place of

children's laughter and games. Similarly, Asian pottery and coins speak to the ethnic diversity of the community. Although census records do not identify Asians living at that address, the archaeological evidence may indicate Chinese servants worked there at some time. Or perhaps the material involves a more subtle process in a place where people from throughout the world shared in one-another's culture and kept exotic souvenirs. Additional insight and more reliable conclusions are promised with the completion of analysis, but all the evidence indicates that the UNR's First Comstock Archaeological Field School will go far to enrich our understanding of an immense and complex national landmark.

Ultimately, all concerned hoped that the project would create good will toward the built environment as well as archaeological resources. In fact, there is already some indication that this may be the case: locals who once scoffed at architectural review seem to appreciate being included in the archaeological process, and many are increasingly well-disposed toward protection of both buildings and archaeology. There has been a growing realization that if properly managed, Comstock archaeological resources could serve as a benefit to the community for decades. Indeed, the promise of additional work already brightens the horizon: UNR's 1994 Comstock Archaeological Field School, under the direction of Dr. Hardesty, is scheduled for five weeks in July and August. Visitors are once again welcomed, and hopes are high for even more progress in retrieving

information and educating the public.

Photo captions:

1. The foundation of Shanahan and O'Connor's Saloon and Hibernia Brewery provided a vivid expression of the underground resources that can enrich the Virginia City Landmark District.

2. A nineteenth-century Comstock building looms above the hillside archaeological investigation of a residential site. Proponents of the project hope that the pursuit of archaeology can improve the management of all cultural resources within the District.